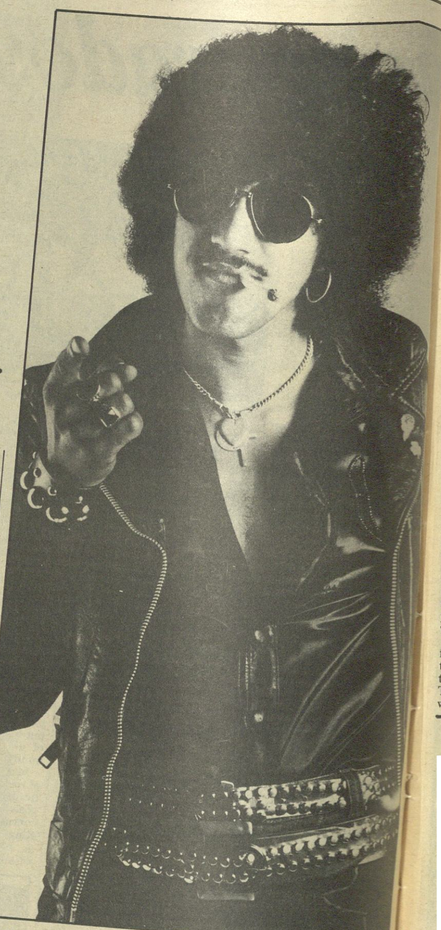
Busy Lizzy

Pete Makowski's putting his money on Thin Lizzy making the real big time. Here, he talks to Phil Lynott and looks at the past, present and future



PHIL LYNOTT'S eyes were glazed with excitement, he banged a fist on the table, a resounding thud echoed through the dressing room, while bottles and glasses teetered dangerously near the edge of the vibrating surface.

"We dunnit! We dunnit!" he screamed getting up and running towards the door. Manchester United had beaten Wolves. Before rushing out to tell the guitar player in the support band the happy news, he paused to have a quick leak in the sink, still cheering he exited leaving me pondering over the fact that how can an Irish half-caste, who supports Manchester United, fail to make an impression on the music world let alone Southampton, which is where Thin Lizzy were playing that night.

The fact is that after five years of ups and downs, splits and all the other possible disasters that could plague any up and coming rock band Lizzy are still continuing to grow in popularity and improve with each album. They are still a force to be reckoned with.

With a 29 date tour of Britain, Lizzy seem to be back in the ring ready for another fight for the championship. Like Rick Parfitt once told me this whole game is like a boxing match and it's the heavyweight champs that are the ones who get noticed.

Lizzy have already won their welterweight title and are barely scarred, although there were times we thought they were going to go down on the count.

After another successful gig in Bournemouth the night before (it was off season too), I talked to Lynott about the band's rollercoaster career. This is by no means a definitive history, just the story so far. . .

LIZZY'S story begins in Dublin where a young and inexperienced Mr. Phillip Lynott began his musical apprenticeship as lead vocalist with the Black Eagles, a soul based band whose main source of work was concentrated in the variety clubs and bingo hall circuits.

"I got into the music business through my uncle," he explained in his soft spoken Irish tones, "he was a good looking feller, always pulling the birds. Anyway, my uncle Phil was in this other band and the Eagles really wanted him. So they asked me to join, thinking that I'd run back raving about them to me uncle who would then join. So my entry into the music business was all a mistake really."

Next job was with Skid Row, Ireland's fastest up and coming band featuring the then 16 year old whiz kid guitarist Gary Moore. "Ireland was always about two years behind the scene and it seemed to stop with the blues. You'll find that a lot of the top Irish rock bands are heavily influenced by the blues, people like Rory (Gallagher).

"Skid Row were very much into the progressive thing, heavy musical workouts of standard and original material." Lynott found his role as vocalist very restricted. "I wasn't really needed anymore, I knew I was in line for the bullet."

It was then that he decided to learn bass and with the help of Row's four string wizard, Brush Shield, he bagan to pick things up.

"After one lesson I was pushed on stage", he revealed. Skid Row went to London to record two albums on CBS, achieving a certain amount of success. Gary Moore split to form his own band who recorded 'Grinding Stone' on CBS. The rest of the band's history crops up later.

Now that Lynott was out on his own he decided to form a band, this is where he meets drummer Brian Downey who was playing with Sugar Shack. Lynott and Downey formed Orphanage.

"The whole idea of the band was that there was always a nucleus of four members and we'd have three other musicians travelling with us, it was a musical orphanage . . . . a nice idea."

Downey split for a while when Sugar Shack hit the charts with their interpretation of 'Morning Dew', he soon returned and by this time Ulster born guitarist Eric Bell enters the scene.

Bell, who had played with Van Morrison's Them and a group called Shades Of Blue, was playing with an Irish showband — an easy source of income. "Eric went through stages where he was really into the music and he'd starve for a while and then he'd want an easy gig."

Bell spotted Orphanage at a place called the Countdown Club and discussions between various parties ensued, resulting with the formation of Lizzy, which was a four piece with keyboards. It was decided that due to financial limitations the band would have to be trimmed down to a three piece — Lynott, Bell and Downey.

Like Lynott's entrance into showbiz Lizzy's 'discovery' had a touch of the shamrocks about it. A&R man Frank (brother of Clodagh) Rodgers was going to this club to see singer Ditch Cassidy and his band. Disaster strikes! Cassidy's band splits up the day before their big debut, but to the rescue come Lizzy who are playing at the gig, they offer to help out Cassidy and become his backing band.

Rodgers goes to the gig, sees Lizzy do their stuff and is so impressed that he signs them up almost immediately.

Like a fairy story innit?

The band come to England to record their debut album on Decca under the guidance of Scott ('Brandy') English. "I don't remember much about it", said Phil referring to the debut album, "we were so out of it while we were doing it." They also recorded an EP in commemoration of their departure from Dublin.

By now Lizzy are already being toted as a "promising new band". Then Luxembourg DJ Kid Jensen picks up on them and figures quite prominently in their future. The ball starts moving but the greenbacks aren't in great supply.

The next album 'Shades Of A Blue Orphanage' Lynott feels was a minor disaster. "A depressing time for the band, we just didn't feel it sounded like us, it lacked the balls, the energy."

It was at that time that Lynott was offered a job with Ritchie Blackmore who was considering leaving the ranks of Purple (circa Gillan/Glover departure) and forming a band featuring Phil, Ian Paice and rumoured possibilities of Paul Rodgers.

They had a couple of rehearsals but the whole thing was abruptly put to a halt when Lizzy's single 'Whisky In The Jar', enters the charts after six months of release and Blackmore decides to make another go of it with Hughes and Coverdale in the line up. "I'd still like to hear the tapes from those Blackmore sessions one day."

'Whisky In The Jar' was a rocked up version of a traditional Irish tune. The story goes that Lynott just went into it during rehearsals for a laugh and things developed from there. "It was a song I used to do on the folk circuits which was a great thing to get into on your day off, take out the acoustic guitar. You'd get free booze, crisps and plenty of chicks."

Originally Lizzy's single was to be 'Black Boys On The Corner', this appeared on the B-side. After continual pushing on various stations like Luxembourg (who seemed to have endless faith in it) the record finally took off.

"It really took us by surprise," recalled Lynott, "we were in Germany at the time and suddenly we were flung into a new world."

In my mind 'Whisky' was about the worst and best thing that could have happened to Lizzy. It was a gimmick record, which wasn't judged for musical quality. A paper even declared that a British counterpart would be a reggae version of 'Greensleeves'.

There was no doubt it was a one off hit, which attracted one off listeners and the thousands of punters who go out to shops and buy whatever happens to be in the top forty at the time. True, it achieved international success (reaching number 5 in Bangkok and number 1 in Belgrade) it was still a mistake . . . and a valuable lesson.

The band did a tour of the Top Rank ballrooms and due to their musical prowess their following continued to grow. But now they were attracting a teeny-bopper market.

'Deaf-never to hear again. Never to hear the funky sounds of rock. Never to listen to the soaring notes of a favourite piece of classical music. This is the future facing Phil Lynott — Thin Lizzy's lead guitarist and vocalist" *Music Star* December '73.

This is the type of headline to be seen when it was announced that Lynott was warned by the doctors to lay off the decibels. The band were attracting a new market, as I pondered over their publicist's scrapbook their faces continually appear in pre-pubescent mags, reminiscing about first loves and their opinion of the Osmonds (really) and somehow, something didn't click. It was obvious something had to change — the image or the music.

"So maybe they are a one hit wonder. Thin Lizzy are basically a recording band, they do not come over particularly well on stage and despite some considerable success in their native Ireland they are still working on building up a repertoire." *Record Mirror* April '73.

Another view. The band's follow up to 'Whisky' was 'Rudolph's Tango', a good strong original song which was even laced with commercial potential, it flopped. "It was the result of a conscious effort not to record a follow up," admitted Lynott.

Next came the album 'Vagabonds Of The Western World'. "Overall the sound is too close to Stan Webb's Chicken Shack, Silverhead and Uriah Heep," said the *Herts Advertiser*. In fact the album was a major victory for the band, it at last established their direction which was definitely musical and their identity which was very positive.

I haven't really discussed Lizzy's actual music so far that's because before 'Vagabonds' the band were rather nondescript. They were all good musicians and it was obvious that Lynott was a fine songwriter but somehow the formula didn't gell.

'Vagabonds' showed the band as more than a power trio which in turn complimented Lynott's writing, which was a combination of folk, traditional, funk, rock all wrapped up in a commercial but musically interesting package.

Kid Jensen appears on one track, 'The Hero And The Madman' as the latter. This album gained the band a new following although they were still appearing in the teenyzines. They were still obviously after a single, for they issued 800 specially pressed EP's containing four tracks off the 'Vagabonds' album to all the DJ's, letting them decide the future single.

The track picked was 'The Rocker'. It sold very well but didn't take off. "It's weird 'cause that song is still our most popular number today, in fact over the years it's sold enough copies to get into the charts."

In December '73 the band's ever growing touring schedule was drawn to a halt when Brian Downey collapsed and was ordered to rest. Temporary substitute for the band's Irish tour was drummer Pearse Kelly from the Gary Moore Band.

A month later their was another casualty, "THIN LIZZY GUITARIST HIT BY EXHAUSTION — Thin Lizzy guitarist Eric Bell is suffering from nervous exhaustion and has had to drop out of the group's present Irish tour following his collapse in Belfast" — *Dublin Evening Herald*.

Ironically enough the services of Gary Moore were called in to deputise 'until Eric recovers' and it was emphasised by the management that: "Gary's appearance with the band is of a temporary nature and should not be construed as being a prelude to a permanent position within the Lizzy line up." — *Dublin Evening Herald*.

"He just wanted to stay in Ireland," said Phil referring to Bell," he just wasn't into flying all over the place spending a whole day preparing five minutes mime tapes, wearing stage gear."

Bell stayed in Ireland and for a while played in a band he formed with Brush Shields and then almost completely stopped playing. Recently he formed a band with Noel Redding (who resides in Ireland) who are currently touring the States and recording with RCA.

"When Eric split our first reaction was to ask Gary, it was natural, he was a good mate of ours. We had such a laugh on the Irish tour that he decided to stay for a while although we all knew it wasn't going to be a permanent thing 'cause musically we were both at opposite ends."

Moore's arrival affected the group's following, now Lizzy were pulling in two sets of fans (in fact this is the time that I really got interested in them). They cut a single, 'Little Darling', which was definitely powerful stuff.

With the combination of Moore's musicianship and Lynott's songwriting the band seemed unbeatable and I'm positive that they would have been riding in the top rock stakes now if things had remained that way.

As expected, Moore left to eventually team up with Jon Hiseman to form Colisseum II. He had recorded a couple of tracks, some which might appear on a Lizzy compilation album, (no fixed release date) and one track 'Still In Love With You' which appeared on the next album 'Nightlife', which was intended for a projected solo album by Lynott.

After Moore's departure the band started auditioning for a new guitarist to take on a German tour already set. "It was quite embarrassing," recalled Lynott, "we had to turn down quite a few named people because they didn't suit the band."

In the end they ended up with two guitarists. Ex Ellis man Andy Gee and former Atomic Rooster and Hard Stuff man John Cann. It was obvious this was not going to be a permanent affair.

They split and by now Lynott and Downey were thoroughly disillusioned and were ready to call it a day. "We were feeling tired, like Eric felt when he left the band."

'Vagabonds' had just entered the US charts and the management (comprising of Chris Morrison and Chris O'Donnell commonly known as the dynamic duo, they must be as they also manage John Cale) persuaded Lynott and Downey to stay together.

"I thought 'right I'm going to take my time about things this time' and we spent ages auditioning various combinations of musicians, guitars and piano etc." Then one of the roadies suggested young 'up and coming' Glaswegian guitarist Brian Robertson.

They auditioned and things worked out fine. Robertson was only 18 but already he was a veteran of the road. Once playing with Dream Police, whose various members teamed up with some of Forever More to become the Average White Band.

It was decided another guitarist was needed to add more strength and colour. Enter Scott Gorham. From LA. Gorham was doing the pub rounds with a band called Fast Buck. Through his brother-in-law, Bob C. Benberg (drummer with Supertramp) and members of Ronnie Lane's Slim Chance, he got to know Lizzy and finally got together with them. "Most guitarists played against Brian, while Scott played off him, we knew he was right straight away."

Apart from changing the line-up, the band also changed labels, joining Phonogram to release 'Night Life' (which contained some songs that were to appear on Lynott's aforementioned solo album). A fairly unstunning affair, it showed that the band were more of a unit, although it lacked the dynamics that were there before.

'Fighting' followed, featuring the single that almost did it, 'Rosalie'. A song by Bob Seger, who toured with Lizzy when they went to the States supporting Bachman Turner Overdrive. A successful tour which has apparently earnt Lizzy a page in Randy Bachman's biography.

'Fighting' appeared in the charts on both sides of the Atlantic, not in a big way but enough to create more than a ripple of interest. Both American and British tours achieved enough reaction to ensure return dates.

"It's funny 'cause this band's creating more interest than the predecessors, we're continually pulling new people . . . lots of women too," Phil added with a sly grin, "a lot of the chicks that come don't even seem to be interested in the music." We leave the subject there.

The band's new album, 'Jailbreak', was produced by John Alcock (who is noted for his works with John Entwistle) from what I've heard it's their most solid effort yet. Three albums with the new band, they seem to be getting closer to that golden apple. They deserve success for their sheer determination alone.

Lizzy might not be as inspiring or innovative as they once were but they still have the dynamics and ability to stand out amongst the crowd. They don't limit themselves musically and venture into many different styles, still maintaining the essence of what they're all about.

If they stick it out, then I'm sure we'll be in store for a few more surprises. I mean if Manchester United can come back in such grand style, who can tell what will happen?

Discography

ALBUMS
'THIN LIZZY' (Decca SKL 5082)
'SHADES OF A BLUE ORPHANAGE' (Decca TXF 108)
'VAGABONDS OF THE WESTERN WORLD' (Decca SKL 5170)
'NIGHTLIFE' (Vertigo 6360116)
'FIGHTING' (Vertigo 6360121)
'JAILBREAK' (Vertigo 9102 008)

SINGLES
'WHISKY IN THE JAR' (Decca SL 3355)
'RANDOLPH'S TANGO' (Decca SL 34402)
'THE ROCKER' (Decca SL 3467)
'LITTLE DARLING' (Decca SL 3507)
'PHILOMENA' (Vertigo 6059111)
'ROSALIE' (Vertigo 6059124)
'WILD ONE' (Vertigo 6059129)

Equipment

PA
4000 Watts Midas Martin PA
20 Channel Mixing Desk
1600 Watts Midas Martin monitoring with independent monitor mix

BRIAN ROBERTSON
1 Lesley Cabinet
2 Marshall 100 watt amps
1 Marshall 50 watt amp
2 Marshall Cabinets
1 Copycat Echo
Gibson Les Paul Guitar

SCOTT GORHAM
Marshall 100 watt stack
MXR 90-Phaser
Gibson Les Paul Deluxe Guitar

PHIL LYNOTT
Fender Cabinet
Hi Watt 100 watt amp
Acoustic Cabinet
270 Acoustic Top
MXR 100 Watt Phaser
Mutron Brass Master
Fender Precision Bass

BRIAN DOWNEY
26" Double Bass Drum Kit — Gretsch